Osip Mandelstam

Four poems and a biographical note

Notre Dame

A basilica stands where Roman justice
judged another nation: displaying its nerves,
as joyful as Adam to have stood there first,
the light cross-vault plays with its muscles.

But a secret scheme is revealed outside:
the strength of the saddling arches forestalls
the buckle and collapse of the laden walls,
and the war-ram of the bold vault stays idle.

Maze of the maker, forest to pass
understanding, the Gothic mind's abyss,
Egyptian force, the meekness of Christians,
oak beside reed where plumblines are tsars.

But what might I one day create,
stronghold Notre Dame, I'd think on my trips
to study and study those monstrous ribs:
a kind of beauty from hostile weight.

1912

NOTRE DAME

Где римский судия судил чужой народ,
Стоит базилика - и, радостный и первый,
Как некогда Адам, распластывая нервы,
Играет мышцами крестовый легкий свод.

Но выдает себя снаружи тайный план:
Здесь позаботилась подпружных арок сила
Чтоб масса грузная стены не сокрушила,
И свода дерзкого бездействует таран.

From *Concert at a Railway Station, Selected Poems*, Osip Mandelstam, translated by Alistair Noon (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2018)

Стихийный лабиринт, непостижимый лес,
Души готической рассудочная пропасть,
Египетская мощь и христианства робость,
С тростинкой рядом - дуб и всюду царь - отвес.

Но чем внимательней, твердыня Notre Dame,
Я изучал твои чудовищные ребра,
Тем чаще думал я: из тяжести недоброй
И я когда-нибудь прекрасное создам.

1912

* * *

Cinema

Three benches plus a projector.
The fever of sentimentality.
A posh heiress entangled
in her evil rival’s nets.

Hands off this love’s true flight,
our heroine’s done nothing wrong!
Her love is pure, near-platonic,
for some lieutenant of the fleet,

sired on the side by a grey count.
Our officer wanders the desert,
and now the pretty countess’s
comic strip gets off the ground.

She starts to wring her hands
like a gypsy gone insane.
The lovers split. Demonic sounds
pound from a hounded piano.

Her trust’s not hard to abuse.
She possesses sufficient bravery

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to swoop on some crucial papers
of interest to enemy HQs.

Along the chestnut boulevard
a black motor car lumbers.
The film reel rattles. A thump
of alarm thrills our hearts.

Sensibly dressed, with her sac à voyage,
she travels the roads and rails,
only scared of the bloke on her tail,
and gags at a dry mirage.

The finale's bitter and trite:
ends don't justify means!
He gets his dad's domains,
while she gets sentenced to life.

1913

КИНЕМАТОГРАФ

Кинематограф. Три скамейки.
Сантиментальная горячка.
Аристократка и богачка
В сетях соперницы-злодейки.

Не удержать люГ'зи полета:
Она ни в чем не в човата!
Самоотверженно как брата,
Любила лейтенанта флота.

А он скитается в пустыне,
Седого графа сын побочный -
Так начинается лубочный
Роман красавицы-графини.

И в исступленьи, как гитана,
Она заламывает руки.

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Разлука. Бешеные звуки
Затравленного фортепьяно.

В груди доверчивой и слабой
Еще достаточно отваги
Похитить важные бумаги
Для неприятельского штаба.

И по каштановой аллее
Чудовищный мотор несется.
Стрекочет лента, сердце бьется
Тревожнее и веселее.

В дорожном платье, с саквояжем,
В автомобиле и в вагоне,
Она боится лишь погони,
Сухим измучена миражем.

Какая горькая нелепость:
Цель не оправдывает средства!
Ему - отцовское наследство,
А ей - пожизненная крепость!

1913

* * *

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We live, but feel no land at our feet,
nor ten steps off any whisper of speech.
Where half a conversation finds enough lips,
it’s the Kremlin-Climber our thoughts are with.
His weighty fingers as greasy as worms,
true as a dumbbell tumble his words.
His laughing moustache is cockroach-huge,
there’s a gleam from the tops of his boots.

Around him, the rabble of slim-necked princes,
half-human officials, their labours his playthings.
One whines like a cat, one whistles or snivels
as he blabs and jabs at them; the gifts he gives,
decree by decree, he pounds like iron
into groin, into crown, into brow, into eye –
lemons, no matter what capital offence,
and it’s broad, that Ossetian chest.

November 1933

Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны,
Наши речи за десять шагов не слышны,
А где хватит на полразговорца,
Там припомнят кремлевского горца.
Его толстые пальцы, как черви, жирны,
И слова, как пудовые гири, верны,
Тараканьи смеются усища
И сияют его голенища.

А вокруг него сброд тонкошеих вождей,
Он играет услугами полулюдей.
Кто свистит, кто мяучит, кто хнычет,
Он один лишь бабачит и тычет,
Как подкову, дарит за указом указ:
Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз.
Что ни казнь у него - то малина,
И широкая грудь осетина.

Ноябрь 1933

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* * *

Voronezh, Crow-Town, permit me to go:
you run me to the verge, but preserve my knowledge,
you rent me a niche as I veer near the edge,
random Voronezh, ruining town of crows.

Give me back and let me go,
you'll let me fall or else you'll fumble,
you'll give me up or drop me, dump me,
town whose name's a knife and crow.

April 1935

Пусти меня, отдай меня, Воронеж:
Уронишь ты меня иль проворонишь,
Ты выронишь меня или вернешь,
Воронеж - блажь, Воронеж - ворон, нож...

Апрель 1935

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Biographical note

"What street are we on? / Mandelstam Street. / Damned if I know what that name means. / Try to unscrew it it still sounds wrong, / all twisted and not very clean."

(...)

Mandelstam was born into a Jewish family in Warsaw, then still part of the Russian Empire, in 1891. His retrospective prose piece *The Noise of Time* (1925) contrasts his mother's clear assimilation into Russian culture with his father's more ambivalent relationship to Russian and attachment to German literature and philosophy (though Clarence Brown, one of the first Western scholars to write on Mandelstam, suggests that Mandelstam overdramatised this contrast for literary effect). Osip moved with his family at an early age to St. Petersburg, where he attended the progressive Tenishev's School, whose alumni were also to include Vladimir Nabokov. At the age of twenty he converted to Methodism, principally to circumvent the restrictions then in place on Jews entering university, but the move was also emblematic of Mandelstam's affinity to the culture of Western Europe: Italian, German, French and Spanish poetry were all to become important to him. Anna Akhmatova, her then husband Nikolai Gumilyov and Mandelstam became the best-known members of the Acmeist school of poetry, which laid emphasis on the architectural quality of poetry and the meaning of the word "as such", in reaction to what they saw as the over-abstraction of Symbolist poetics, then in the ascendancy in Russia. Mandelstam wrote what would become the group's most famous manifesto, *The Morning of Acmeism*, though it was not published until some years after the group had established itself.

Mandelstam's politics have been the subject of critical contention. Youthful pre-war interest in the Social Revolutionaries, a rival leftist group to the Bolsheviks, transmuted to sympathy with Kerensky's Provisional Government that held power between the two Russian revolutions of 1917, tied to a suspicion of the incoming Bolsheviks and the means by which they were already establishing their hegemony. While in the Crimea for part of the Civil War that followed the October Revolution though, Mandelstam was equally dismayed by the violence of both Red and White forces. A recurring theme in iconic incidents related about Mandelstam is his insistent opposition to the death penalty. It remains debated as to

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what extent the absolute hostility to the Soviet authorities ascribed to him by his literary and political opponents during the 1920s and 30s was fully founded in fact. The period since the collapse of the Soviet Union has also seen it argued that his attitude to the Soviet state in the 1930s wavered between opposition and a desire to integrate himself back into Soviet life, and not only so as to save himself from the arrest and death he had long anticipated.

In any event, his work's admiration for the Classical and European past did not chime well with the Bolsheviks' emphasis on progress and the future (though with their conception of the poet as architect/builder, the Acmeists weren't quite as anti-modernist/progressive as their opponents made them out to be, despite Akhmatova and Gumilyov's aristocratic backgrounds). In the 1920s Mandelstam came under increasing pressure from writers and literary administrators more in line with the dominant political tendencies within the Soviet government. The second half of the 1920s saw him largely abandon poetry, in part at least through being told by Politburo member Nikolai Bukharin, later to die himself in Stalin's purges, that his poetry would no longer be published. Mandelstam's prose continued, however, and he supported himself by making literary translations chiefly from French as well as writing children's poetry.

Another recurring biographical trope is the ease with which Mandelstam would fall in love, whether or not this was requited. He had a relationship with the poet Marina Tsvetaeva for several months in 1916, and the evidence points to an infatuation with Akhmatova in the winter following the October Revolution of 1917. But the sturdiest anchor in his life was Nadezhda Mandelstam, née Khazina, whom he met in Kiev in 1919 and married three years later. She came to play an integral part in his poetry too, both in his lifetime and thereafter. Acting as his poetry secretary (Mandelstam's method of composition was primarily oral), she would then preserve his unpublished poetry after his death, in part through memorisation, enable its later publication after the Stalin era, and become a noted writer herself with her memoirs of life with Mandelstam and her subsequent odyssey through the Soviet Union.

Bukharin arranged in 1930 for Mandelstam to undertake an extended stay in the Caucasus, chiefly in Armenia. As well as the *Armenia* sequence translated here, the stay also resulted in the prose work *Journey to Armenia*, and prompted a second, if sporadic flourishing of Mandelstam's work (both poetry as well as his most extensive poetolgical essay,

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Conversation on Dante, of 1933). This later work, however, was to remain almost wholly unpublished in his lifetime. A poem openly critical of Stalin, translated here as ***'We live, but feel no land at our feet'*** and often referred to as "The Stalin Epigram", resulted in Mandelstam's first arrest after one of the few people he read the poem to – exactly who it was remains unknown – reported him to the NKVD (the Stalin-era name for what would later be known as the KGB). Following detention, interrogation and torture, Mandelstam was exiled first to the city of Cherdyn in the Urals (the journey to Cherdyn forms the background to the poem translated here as ***The River Kama***), where he attempted to commit suicide by jumping from a third-floor window (his fall was broken by a bed of earth). Boris Pasternak, poet and later the author of the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, subsequently received a personal telephone call from Stalin, who asked Pasternak to provide an appraisal of Mandelstam. The brief intervention Pasternak was able to make may have played a part in Mandelstam being allowed to go into internal exile in a provincial city of his choosing. He chose Voronezh, 300 miles south of Moscow, in the fertile black earth region, adjacent to the Ukraine.

Finding a flat in Voronezh was as difficult as it had been previously in Moscow and Petersburg – at one point the Mandelstams were renting a balcony – but Osip was initially able to find occasional paid work with local cultural institutions such as the theatre and radio. But as Stalin's hold on power became ever tighter, gathering fear and repression meant that Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam were largely ostracised and no longer able to find work in Voronezh, making their physical existence precarious. They were nevertheless befriended by the young school teacher Natasha Shtempel, to whom poems translated in this volume are addressed, and who was also to play a key role in the preservation of Mandelstam's work. Despite – or because of? – an ever-increasing sense of doom on Mandelstam's part, his poetic work proceeded apace, resulting in what have become known as the *Voronezh Notebooks*. These three note- books survived the Stalin period variously through memorization and being hidden by several friends.

As with other Soviet poets of the period, Mandelstam made a more than understandable attempt to put himself on the right side of Stalin with the poem translated here as ***'Should I take charcoal for the highest praises'***, which has become known as "The Ode" (the fact that journals he submitted it to refused to publish it indicates just how dangerous his

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situation had become). As Mandelstam's work began to be circulated in samizdat form after Stalin's death, Nadezhda Mandelstam – again, understandably – chose to exclude this poem addressed to the man who had effectively murdered her husband from, if not the corpus, then the canon of Mandelstam's work, making much of the fact that the poem was drafted directly on paper rather than composed in his head as was Mandelstam's usual practice, indicating that the poem was composed under duress. Post-Soviet scholarship, however, such as that of M.L. Gasparov, has pointed to the poem's links and parallels with other poems Mandelstam was writing at the time, and while acknowledging the possible ironic, contradictory, subversive readings for the poem, argued that the poem cannot be reduced to simply a dissident interpretation.

In 1938, Mandelstam's term of internal exile in Voronezh ended. There followed a brief period of extreme nomadity in small towns around Moscow (from which Mandelstam himself was banned). A state-sponsored stay in a sanatorium allowed the authorities to isolate Mandelstam fully; from this sanatorium he was arrested and this time transported past the Urals and as far as a Gulag transit camp near Vladivostok in the Soviet Far East, where he died in late 1938. Famously, his widow received an official letter, via Mandelstam's brother, stating that her husband had died of "heart failure". For lack of details at the time, this was taken by her and the readers of her memoirs as being an evasion of specifying the real cause of death, and implying that he may have been shot. An eye-witness account of Mandelstam's actual death was to emerge in 1991, however: already severely weakened by a heart condition and malnutrition, Mandelstam had been standing unclothed for 40 minutes in freezing temperatures during a de-lousing action at the transit camp. He keeled over and died. It was, indeed, "heart failure".

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